

# Against the Grain

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## Wryly Noted- Books About Books

John D. Wryly

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# Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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**The Library Book** by Susan Orlean. (ISBN: 978-1-4767-40188, Simon & Schuster Publishers, 2018. HB \$28.00.)

**S**usan Orlean is well known as a journalist and has been on the staff of the *New Yorker* since 1992. She is the author of seven books including *Rin Tin Tin* and the *Orchid Thief*. In *The Library Book* Orlean tells the story of the 1986 fire that nearly destroyed the **Los Angeles Public Library** (LAPL from now on) but in her attempt to be thorough she tries to cover too much material and the book comes up short, lacking in any real focus or depth of coverage. Orlean's style has been called "immersive journalism," which must mean that she tries to be personally involved in all parts of her story. She did spend many hours at the LAPL documenting the immense fire of April 29, 1986 that is the largest library fire in U.S. history. The blaze destroyed over four hundred thousand items, twenty percent of the collection, with most of the remaining books suffering from smoke and water damage. To the detriment of her story and narrative trajectory, she tries to tell the entire history of the library's public services, technical services and reference services at the same time that she is recounting a detective story, hence the title: *The Library Book*. These "behind the scenes" vignettes are too short and perfunctory and seem to serve as filler for a mystery story that never arrives at a solution.

Orleans spends nearly half the book tracking down relatives, friends, and acquaintances of Harry Peak, the central figure in her story. He was suspected of being a disgruntled patron who, when turned away from the library before opening time, went on to ignite the fire in retaliation. But in the end, the only evidence detectives could track down was circumstantial at best and Peaks avoided prosecution. Harry Peak was a totally lackluster character, a hanger-on around Hollywood and a gofer for several LA lawyers. Trying to drape the whole story of the fire around him was not compelling in the least. In the end the book is a meandering and failed detective story that simply promised too much. The reader is dragged on by myriad details hoping that in the end there would be some resolution to the mystery of the fire, but that hope fizzles out as the story goes up in smoke with no solution to the crime.

As with many other books, the digressions in *The Library Book* end up being the most interesting part of the narrative. The LAPL has a fascinating history going back to 1872, a more rugged time when the Wild West was just dying out. In her retelling, Orlean recounts how women were initially leaders in the library administration, but then were pushed aside as the jobs were professionalized and men began to make up a larger percentage of the staff. One of the earliest library directors was **Mary Foy**, an eighteen-year old who was known for

her encyclopedic knowledge of the collection. However, when her father began to prosper in the business world, the library board felt her father could then support her. In their thinking, since she didn't need the job, she was replaced by an older librarian, **Lydia Prescott**. Library paternalism turned to outright misogyny however when **Mary Jones**, a popular and accomplished librarian, was replaced by a man, **Charles Lummis**, simply because the library board felt that a man should be the administrator of library affairs. However colorful and eccentric the story of **Charles Loomis** is, it will always be tarnished by his insider rise to power. Orleans continues to dwell on the vagaries of library personnel and administration, but even her personal relationships with the librarians couldn't sustain the same drama or interest that the early days held.

Some other digressions are particularly interesting, for example, the story of the construction of the building that houses the library. The **LAPL Central Library** was designed by the noted architect **Bertram Goodhue** who incorporated Moorish, Spanish, and Modernistic details into all parts of the library. He sought to create a gesamtwerk or total art piece which incorporated beautiful murals, sculptures and bas reliefs, woodwork, immense chandeliers, and expansive gardens. Goodhue had been a lead architect of the 1915 World's Fair in San Diego that celebrated the opening of the Panama Canal. There he created an exuberant celebration of early California history which gave rise to the fashion for Spanish revival architecture that took California by storm. Much of the Fair's architecture can still be seen in Balboa Park in San Diego.

What were initially forward-looking design features in the library turned out to be dangerous fire hazards. The construction of four "silos" of seven stories each allowed the library to compact more shelving into the structure and allowed air to circulate around the books, but in the end the stacks acted as wind tunnels and smoke stacks for a fire that had gotten started slowly. The Fire Marshals never did figure what started the fire, but the library had notoriously bad electrical wiring, a faulty alarm system, and it contained twice as many books as it had been designed for. It also lacked fire doors between floors.

Another interesting digression that Orlean takes us on is the debunking of many so-called scientific theories of arson. Most of the evidence presented in court up to that time turned

out to be based on mere conjecture, such as thinking that a fire burns most intensely where it originated. It turns out that there are many other variables that influence the intensity of a fire. In the case of the **LAPL** fire, Marshals knew where the fire started because fire fighters arrived early enough to observe it. But, as mentioned before, the structure of the library accelerated the small fire that was burning when first responders showed up. Another fire that was raging at the same time was the Chernobyl reactor meltdown. That disaster claimed all the headlines for weeks and many people outside of Los Angeles were unaware of how serious the library fire had been.

One particular detail of Orlean's explanation of the fire rung particularly untrue to me. To prove her point that books were a type of incendiary device just waiting to burst into flames she took a paperback copy of *Fahrenheit 451* into her back yard and when she touched it with a match the book lit up like a torch that burned in "...a nearly instantaneous combustion-and the entire book was gone in seconds." I have never had that experience of a book burning so easily. As **Ray Bradbury** himself observed, it is only at a sustained temperature of 451 degrees that books begin to burn. The books in his novel were hit with flame throw-

ers, rather than just a match. In fact, the temperatures in the **LAPL** fire reached over 2,500 degrees! The fire burned out of control for over seven hours in what is known as a "flashover." Among the items lost in the conflagration were a quarter million photographs of Los Angeles dating back to the 1850s, five and a half million American patent listings dating from 1799 with drawings and descriptions, three quarters of the library's microfilm holdings, a book by **Andrea Palladio** from 1500, every single art book printed on glossy paper (which turned to goo when exposed to water), and the largest collection of books on food and cooking in the country, not to mention a large collection of books on citrus cultivation.

Interestingly, Orlean takes us on a detour to explore many other library fires, especially the phenomenon known as "libricide," or the intentional burning of book collections. The Nazis were the most infamous practitioners of this cultural destruction. They knew how precious books were to the Jewish people, their heritage and their very identity. Books were targeted for destruction by bands known as "Brenn-Kommandos" who were tasked with torching synagogues and libraries. **Goebbels** made use of "Feuerspuche" or "Fire Incantations" where books were "sentenced

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to death.” As the poet **Heine** remarked presciently “There where one burns books, one in the end burns men.”

In the aftermath of the **LAPL** fire the community pulled together to rebuild an even larger and better facility. As one librarian put it “...the fire was a saving grace. People rallied around the library and they realized how much they loved it and wanted to save it.” The **LAPL** had fallen on hard times by 1986 when the fire took it down. Downtown Los Angeles, where the library was located, had been hollowed out by residents moving to the suburbs and companies relocating to the malls. What had been left was a neglected structure and a library searching for its mission. The homeless population had boomed in the downtown area and the library struggled to work with the city and human service agencies to help them survive the harsh environment. Much of **Orlean’s** book tells the story of how the library responded to this complete change in its clientele.

Immediately after the fire, librarians and city agencies and corporations worked together to salvage as many books from the fire as they could. Los Angeles is home to many fish processing plants and their warehouses became vital temporary storage where books could be kept at below freezing temperatures until they could be rehabilitated. After several months, strategies were put in place for mass dehydration by vacuum drying and dehumidifying. In the end nearly 700,000 books went through this process. It was the largest book drying project in history. Los Angeles was the home to many aerospace companies who pitched in their vacuum chambers for the project.

The **LAPL** finally reopened in 1993 and celebrated their success with a float in the Rose Parade that featured a book worm reading a newspaper with the headline “Central Library Reopens October 3, 1993.” The library is now a central cultural institution in the reborn downtown of Los Angeles. Architects were able to restore the central core designed by **Goodhue** and expand the building and its gardens. The new library now has state of the art fire doors, fire alarms, and fire suppressant technology.

I think most readers and especially librarians will find the details in this book to be fascinating and possibly newsworthy, but in the end the author tried to tell too much and in so doing lost the thread of her story. **Susan Orlean** is to be commended for bringing to light many details surrounding the fire that engulfed the **LAPL**, details that may have been ignored up until now. She also provides an important admonition to libraries on how to safeguard their collections in our country where there are more than 200 library fires a year. 🐼

## Booklover — Life

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Retired, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC 29425) <donna.jacobs55@gmail.com>

What is in store for life in 2019? Always an interesting question to ponder. In the short story *The Call of Life* **Knut Pedersen Hamsun’s** lead character ponders many questions about the life of a woman he meets while taking an evening stroll along Vestervold Street in Copenhagen. Each musing leads to an interesting twist. We learn the woman’s name is Ellen; we learn that she is young; we learn personal details about Ellen; and we learn that her husband, who is many years her senior, has just passed away. We learn this fact after the main character spends an intimate night with Ellen in her home and the next morning observes a corpse lain out in the adjoining room to the one where he is making use of a wash stand. “I sat for a long time and pondered.”

**Knut Pedersen Hamsun** was awarded the 1920 **Nobel Prize in Literature** for his monumental work, *Growth of the Soil*. <https://www.nobel-prize.org/prizes/literature/1920/summary/> Each Nobel

is featured on this website, some with more information than others. **Knud Pedersen** — he wrote under several pen names — was born in Lom, Norway in 1859. His early life was full of struggles and he worked at a wide variety of jobs. From sheriff’s assistant to elementary school teacher to store clerk to odd jobs throughout America, **Hamsun** would try anything for a dollar. It was while apprenticing with a ropemaker at the age of 17 that he began to write. He successfully published his first book in 1890 using his experiences and struggles with all of his odd jobs to guide the narrative.

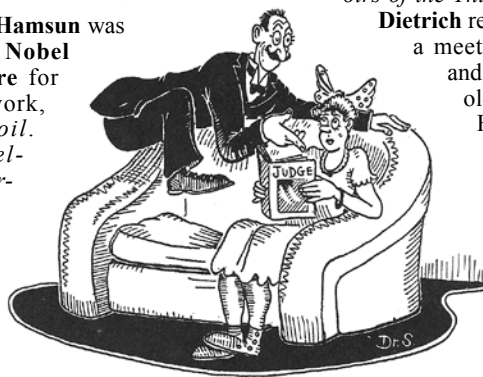
Although **Hamsun** was awarded the **Nobel** for *Growth of the Soil*, the 1890 semiautobiographical work *Hunger* is considered by many to be **Hamsun’s** real claim to literary fame.

The writing of **Hamsun** influenced **Isaac Bashevis Singer**, who also won a **Nobel Prize in Literature** in 1978. This influence developed into **Singer** not only translating many of **Hamsun’s** works but also calling **Hamsun** “the father of the modern school of literature in his every aspect — his subjectiveness, his fragmentariness, his use of flashbacks, his lyricism. The whole modern school of fiction in the twentieth century stems from **Hamsun**.” (A quote attributed to **Singer’s** introduction in a 1967 translated version of *Hunger*.)

Like many authors, **Hamsun** had strong political leanings. He was a strong advocate for Germany, the German culture, Nazi ideology and eulogized **Hitler** after his death. In **Otto Dietrich’s** memoir *The Hitler I Knew: Memoirs of the Third Reich’s Press Chief*, **Dietrich** relates an anecdote about a meeting between **Hamsun** and **Hitler**. **Hamsun** was old and hard of hearing. He interrupted **Hitler** many times in their conversation where **Hamsun** was critiquing the behavior of the German government toward the Norwegians. **Dietrich** states that the Führer was in a fury for several days after the exchange.

When the wars shifted the political wind, these political positions created difficulties for him. His books were burned. He was subjected to a psychiatric exam to determine if his mental state was stable to stand a trial for treason. He was found to be impaired and the treason charges were dropped. Then in 1949 **Hamsun** wrote his final book — maybe as a testament to an improved mental facility.

Now life is calling me back to *The Riddle of the Labyrinth: The Quest to Crack an Ancient Code* by **Margalit Fox**, the story of the three people involved with the discovery and subsequent decoding of Linear B. 🐼



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2021 Conference — Monday-Friday, November 1-5, 2021

[www.charlestonlibraryconference.com](http://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com)